Internet Addiction in China: Some Teens Harshly Treated

by M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP-ISSMP
Associate Professor of Information Assurance
School of Business & Management
Norwich University, Northfield VT

Internet growth in China has been phenomenal. According to the Miniwatts Marketing Group’s “Internet World Stats,” between 2000 and 2009, the estimated number of Internet users in the People’s Republic grew from 23M to 338M and the penetration percentage grew from 1.7% to 25.3%.<http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia/cn.htm>

Inevitably, some people have started to exceed other people’s views on what is reasonable for daily use of the Internet. The concept of “Internet addiction” has been used as the basis for psychiatric, medical and even punitive treatment.

In the capital region, <http://www.accci.com.au/keycity/beijing.htm>, parents have been bringing teenagers to the Addiction Medical Center (AMC) at the General Hospital of the Beijing Military Region for several years. An article by Richard Stone from June 2009<http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/short/324/5935/1630> in SCIENCE magazine [subscription or payment required for online access] quotes Dr Tao Ran, “a psychiatrist and senior colonel” in describing how the children are treated:

AMC’s treatments include behavioral training, drug therapy for patients with mental symptoms, dancing and sports, reading, karaoke, and elements of the “12 step” program of Alcoholics Anonymous. A “very important” part of the regimen is family therapy, says Tao. “Internet addiction occurs because the parents are doing something wrong,” he asserts. Patients tend to have parents who are strict authoritarians or demand perfection, or come from single-parent households or homes in which the parents are frequently fighting, Tao says. In the beginning, parents tend to blame their children, he says, but after treatment they recognize their failings.

In contrast, a number of unregulated clinics in China have become the focus of concern within the country and among outside observers. Some of these clinics sound more like punitive boot camps than supportive institutions.

The most infamous, perhaps, is the Yang Yongxin Center for IA Treatment at public hospital number four in Linyi, Shandong. Last year[2008], a CCTV-12[“a central government channel”] segment recounted how the parents of a young man, “H,” drugged him with a dozen sleeping pills and brought him to Yang’s clinic. After “H” had woken up, he protested to Yang that he was over 18 years old and therefore they could not force him to stay without his consent. Yang bundled “H” into a room, and other patients restrained him on a bed, after which Yang administered shocks— for more than 1 hour, the narrator claimed— with a DX-IIA electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) machine, clearly shown in the program. In an 8 May article in China Youth Daily, Yang explained that he uses a weaker current than standard ECT and that the shocks, although “very painful,” are “harmless.”

In July 2009, Chinese federal authorities ordered investigations into the electro-shock treatments and ordered them suspended: .<
THE Ministry of Health has ordered a hospital in Shandong Province to stop using electric shock therapy to cure young people of Internet addiction, saying there was no scientific evidence that it worked.

Linyi Mental Health Hospital in Shandong used the treatment as part of a four-month program that had so far treated nearly 3,000 young people, China Youth Daily reported yesterday, citing psychiatrist Yang Yongxin who runs the facility.

The ministry said in a statement posted on its Website late on Monday there was no domestic or international clinical proof that electric shock therapy helped cure Internet addiction.

Deng Sanshan was 16 years old when his parents sent the boy to the Guangxi Qihang Survival Training Camp in southern China because his father believed he was suffering from Internet addiction. A few days later, at the end of July 2009, the child was dead. His father, Deng Fei, said that he “was put in solitary confinement within hours of his arrival and was then beaten to death by his trainers.”

“Local officials in the region where a boy was beaten to death at an Internet addiction camp have taken swift action - and fired the editor who ran the story.”

Pu Liang, a 14-year old from Chengdu in Sichuan province, “often stayed out all night playing games in an Internet café” and “neglected his studies.” His mother, Li Shubing, sent him to an Internet-addiction rehabilitation camp at the start of August 2009. Three weeks later, the child was “hospitalized in critical condition with broken ribs, kidney damage and internal bleeding. Removed from the camp by police last week, he told his parents he had been beaten by a counselor and fellow campers after he was unable to complete a rigorous regimen of push-ups.”

Is China in the grip of widespread, grotesque overreaction to “Internet addiction?” It’s hard to say, given the difficulties of getting straight news out that relatively closed country, still in the grip of a totalitarian regime that behaves more like a massive criminal conspiracy more than the ideals of government espoused in more enlightened regions of the world. Are the widespread reports and head-shaking criticism of abusive treatment – including this column itself – well-founded analyses or are they an expression of a Western bias against China and all that is Chinese? I leave readers to a thoughtful and challenging essay by C. W. Hayford entitled “Lies, Damn Lies, and Chinese ‘Lies That Bind’” for some interesting questions about how we view China.

And while you are pondering these serious questions, do have a lovely holiday season.

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M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP-ISSMP specializes in security and operations management consulting services. CV online.